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Rara temporum felicitas: Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise

Edwin Curley

Since we happen to have that rare good fortune (rara felicitas) – that we live in a republic in which everyone is granted complete freedom of judgment, and is permitted to worship God according to his understanding, and in which nothing is thought to be dearer or sweeter than freedom – I believed I would be doing something neither unwelcome, nor useless, if I showed not only that this freedom can be granted without harm to piety and the peace of the republic, but also that it can't be abolished unless piety and the peace of the republic are abolished with it.¹

There is a line in Tacitus which radical thinkers in the early modern period liked to quote, probably for purposes quite different from those of Tacitus. At the beginning of his *Histories*, dealing with the period from 69 to 96 CE, Tacitus says he is postponing for his old age the history of his own, happier times, the reigns of Nerva (96–98) and Trajan (98–117). That would be ‘a richer and less perilous subject...because we have the rare good fortune (*rara temporum felicitas*) to live in an age when it is permitted to think what you wish, and to say what you think.’²

Benedict de Spinoza took this line as formulating an ideal of freedom of thought and expression. In his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), he claims to show that this is what a free state permits its citizens to do: think what they like and say what they think. That formula provides the title of Chapter XX (239). In the preface to the *Treatise*, from which the quotation above is taken, Spinoza even says that his own society has realized this ideal. This is not true, of course. No doubt Spinoza thought he would be doing something welcome and useful if he defended freedom. But though the Dutch Republic had a commitment to freedom unusual for its time, it did not allow everyone complete freedom

of judgement and worship in matters of religion. If it had, Spinoza would not have felt the need to publish his work anonymously, with false information on the title page about the identity of the publisher and the place of publication. If it had, he might not even have felt the need to write his book in the first place. Explaining his aims in a letter to Henry Oldenburg in 1665, he said one reason he was taking up the theological issues of his book was that he wanted to defend 'the freedom of philosophizing, and saying what we think. Here the preachers suppress it as much as they can with their excessive authority and aggressiveness'.³

The Dutch Republic was, by the standards of its time, a remarkably free place. But the qualification is crucial. The standards of seventeenth-century Europe were not those of twenty-first-century European or North American states.⁴ The Republic had a public church, the Dutch Reformed Church, whose buildings and ministers the state were paid for with public funds. Attendance at the services of this Calvinist church was not mandatory, but for anyone who held public office, membership was mandatory.

It is a mark of the Dutch commitment to religious liberty that they permitted most other Protestant denominations to build their own churches and hire their own pastors. It shows the limits of that liberty that dissident Protestants could do this only under certain conditions: first, they had to pay the state for the privilege of having their own churches; second, there had to be nothing in their teachings or manner of worship prejudicial to the interests of the state; and finally, they had to submit to state monitoring of their services to ensure that the second condition was satisfied.

Catholic worship was not officially permitted. Spain's brutal rule in the sixteenth century had left bitter memories. When the seven rebel provinces agreed in the Union of Utrecht (1579) on the principles which would govern the new state they aimed to set up, one of the most fundamental of these was that there should be, as Sir William Temple put it, 'no particular or curious Inquisition into the Faith or Religious Principles of any peaceable man who came to live under the protection of their laws'.⁵ *De facto* the Catholic minority was permitted to hold services, provided they were discreet. They had to meet in quarters which did not look like churches and could not advertise their services. Sometimes they had to bribe public officials to look the other way.

In some places – chiefly Amsterdam – even Jews were permitted freedom of worship, though under conditions somewhat more onerous than those imposed on dissident Protestant denominations. They were, for example, forbidden to

belong to most of the guilds, or to intermarry with Christians, or to convert Christians.⁶ The Calvinist clergy were not happy about granting the Jews this freedom, but the Regents were generally inclined, in the tradition of Erasmus, to emphasize ethical conduct over dogma and to not worry too much if a minority religion disagreed with the public church about theological matters, particularly if that minority was industrious and an economic asset to the community. The Socinians (ancestors of those we nowadays call Unitarians) were an odd exception to this toleration. Their worship was not permitted under any conditions. Evidently it was tolerable to deny the doctrine of the trinity if you were a Jew; but if you claimed to be a Christian, you were outside the bounds of toleration if you found that doctrine incredible.

Such were the policies which were sufficient, in seventeenth-century Europe, to earn a country a reputation for being exceptionally tolerant of different religions. But freedom of religion was one thing. The freedom of philosophizing which Spinoza advocated was something else. Not only did Spinoza argue on purely secular grounds for freedom of thought and expression – contending that such freedom is necessary both for the material prosperity of society and for its flourishing in the arts, sciences and philosophy – he also contended that religion itself allowed this freedom (174, 179–180). When God revealed himself to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai, he did not teach them to have true beliefs about his nature. An unprejudiced reading of the Pentateuch would show that even Moses, the prophet traditionally supposed to have surpassed all others in his knowledge of God (Numbers 12:6–8; Deuteronomy 34:10), had a very inadequate conception of God, not realizing that he is omniscient, or that he directs all human actions by his decrees, or that he is free of human affects, or that he is incorporeal, or even that he is the only god (38–39). Contrary to what had long been believed, Moses was no monotheist.⁷

Religion – *true* religion, the kind an intelligent, critical and unprejudiced reader of the Jewish and Christian scriptures would find to be consistently taught in both sets of sacred texts – does not require true belief, Spinoza argued. It requires only obedience. And not obedience to *all* the commands of scripture either but only to those that scripture consistently teaches throughout: to practice justice and loving kindness; and to do the things which clearly follow from these fundamental requirements, such as aiding the poor, killing no-one and not coveting the things that belong to others (165–166). If scripture is inconsistent (as, for example, in its teachings about divorce), then its commands do not bind us.⁸

This is all very congenial to those modern readers who find the ethics of scripture, read selectively, more appealing than its theology. But it does have its problems. For one thing, the Christian scriptures do sometimes require that we believe certain theological propositions in order to be saved. It is not only Paul who says this, as Spinoza tends to suggest (157–158).⁹ It is also Jesus, at least as portrayed in the gospel of John.¹⁰ So, it is no wonder that the credal statements which defined the faith of the Dutch Reformed Church also committed its members to this view.¹¹ The necessity for Christians to have some sort of special belief about Jesus can hardly be denied without denying the reliability of scripture and the authority of those churches which claim to base their teachings on scripture. Spinoza did that. He denied both the need for true beliefs about God and the reliability of scripture when it dealt with speculative matters.

But what may be more important – since it affects even Jews, who don't accept the authority of the New Testament, and whose religion tends to be less credal – is that Spinoza makes the concept of obedience to God problematic. In Chapter IV of the *TTP*, he argues that God cannot be adequately conceived as a lawgiver (62–65).¹² His argument is that a lawgiver is someone who prescribes rules to people which they can either obey or disobey (subject to certain rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience). But if God is omnipotent, his relationship to humans cannot be like that.

If God prescribes laws to his people, then he wills that they behave in certain ways. A law is an expression of the will of the person who makes the law – the sovereign, whether this is an individual or a corporate body. But if an omnipotent being makes a law, the people to whom he gives the law will necessarily behave as the law requires them to. No one can thwart the will of an omnipotent being. That is what it means to be omnipotent. So the notion of God as an omnipotent lawgiver involves a contradiction. An omnipotent being cannot issue a law which those subject to the law can disobey. When Spinoza says that true religion requires only obedience, we are not to think of that 'obedience' as conforming our behaviour to laws issued by God. By all means, observe the requirements of justice and love your neighbour. But don't imagine that by doing so you are obeying a law prescribed by God.

It should surprise no one, then, that Spinoza's book went beyond the limits of what was permissible in the Dutch Republic in the late seventeenth century. Within months of its publication, the elders of the Reformed Church in several Dutch cities – notably, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leiden, and Haarlem – had all proclaimed it blasphemous, dangerous and even obscene.¹³ In the view of the South Holland Synod, it was 'as foul and blasphemous [a work] as any that are

known of or that the world has ever seen'.¹⁴ This judgement may strike some twenty-first-century readers as absurd, but that just shows how far we have come since then. At any rate, when the elders appealed to the civil authorities to suppress Spinoza's work, under a law enacted years earlier which forbade the printing and distribution of irreligious books, they apparently did the best they could to comply. It has often been said that in spite of the efforts of the Reformed Church, the civil authorities permitted the *TTP* to circulate freely in the Dutch Republic for several years. But Jonathan Israel has argued persuasively that this is not true, that the circulation of Spinoza's work owed more to the difficulty of a really thorough suppression, given the institutional structure of the Republic, than it did to the authorities' unwillingness to suppress the work.¹⁵

Was it an act of homage to Spinoza when Hume quoted that passage from Tacitus – the one beginning with *Rara temporum felicitas* – on the title page of his *Treatise of Human Nature*? It would be pleasant to think so, and just conceivably it was. Certainly Hume would have had no sympathy with Spinoza's doctrine that there is only one substance, even if it is clear that the abuse he heaps on Spinoza's 'hideous hypothesis' of monism is feigned, a device designed to embarrass those who think the soul is immaterial. Those people, he argues, hold a position 'almost the same' as that of the infamous atheist, Spinoza.¹⁶ The more tar he can brush on Spinoza, the more there will be to rub off on the orthodox. But no less certainly Hume would have liked Spinoza's psychological analysis of superstition in the Preface to the *TTP*, with its argument that superstition arises from the uncertainties of life, from people's vacillation between hope and fear, and from their desperate desire to control their future.¹⁷ Surely he would have appreciated how deftly Spinoza makes the slide from his account of the causes of superstition to an attack on the clergy for using the human liability to superstition to secure for themselves positions of status and power. Alas, I know of no hard evidence that Hume ever read the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is not even clear that he read the *Ethics*. What he says about Spinoza's metaphysics in his own *Treatise* could all have come from Bayle's well-known (and very misleading) article on Spinoza in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*.¹⁸

However that may be, one thing is tolerably certain. Spinoza and Hume both appreciated the uses to which Tacitus could be put. Like Spinoza, Hume knew that before speaking candidly, he needed to calculate carefully the possible costs of such speech. As he was preparing his *Treatise* for publication, he was most anxious to get Bishop Butler's opinion of his work. Before he could solicit that opinion, he felt obliged to delete from the manuscript his discussion of miracles.

His position was less radical than Spinoza's. He did not deny the metaphysical possibility of miracles, just the possibility of ever having adequate evidence for them. Still, he was concerned enough to write to his friend, Henry Home, who was acting as an intermediary between Hume and the Bishop: 'I am at present castrating my Work, that is, cutting off its noble parts, that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible; before which I could not pretend to put it into [Bishop Butler's] hands. This is a piece of Cowardice, for which I blame myself; tho I believe none of my Friends will blame me'.¹⁹ Indeed, when Home read Hume's discussion of miracles, he advised total suppression of the argument. This was the policy Hume followed for nearly ten years, until he finally included his essay on miracles in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

What is the function of these allusions to Tacitus in Spinoza and Hume? When Tacitus himself wrote the lines from which we began, it seems that he wrote them without irony, as a conventional way of assuring his readers that he had no reason not to say what he thought, that they could trust him to speak the truth as he saw it. He began his *Annals* with a similar passage, promising to treat the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius *sine ira et studio*, without anger and without partiality, motives for which he said he had no cause.²⁰

When Spinoza and Hume quote Tacitus, though, the irony should be plain, even to a reader who does not have the advantage of being able to consult the author's personal correspondence. Were these men really writing in times when they would pay no price for saying what they thought, if what they thought was apt to offend the powerful? In Spinoza's case the answer is clearly 'no'. If we know that, and think Spinoza must have known it too, then the quote from Tacitus functions as a warning: it is a rare piece of good luck when an author is perfectly free to speak his mind; the author of this book is not that lucky; he must make some nice judgements about what he can say without inviting more trouble than he is willing to accept; so you must be on guard when you read him; things may not be what they seem.

In Hume's case, the situation may appear different. It is true that he did 'castrate' his *Treatise* by deleting his essay on miracles. But then he published it nine years later, in the *Enquiry*, commenting to a friend: 'I see not what bad consequences follow, in the present age, from the character of an infidel; especially if a man's conduct be in other respects irreproachable'.²¹ Doesn't that mean that Hume had no reason to fear speaking his mind? Or at least, that if he was confident that his conduct was otherwise beyond reproach, he believed he had no reason for such fear? But really, he ought to have known better. Even at this point in his life, he had already been denied a chair of philosophy at

the University of Edinburgh because his religious views – unless some of his friends had spoken indiscreetly, these must be the views of the expurgated *Treatise*! – were deemed unacceptable. After the publication of the *Enquiry*, he was to lose yet another chair, at the University of Glasgow.²² In the end he did secure an academic appointment which he found satisfactory but as a librarian, not as a professor of philosophy. Mossner's comment on these affairs will provide a fitting conclusion: 'While Professor Clow [James Clow, the successful candidate at Glasgow] ... remains as insignificant as Professor Cleghorn [William Cleghorn, the successful candidate at Edinburgh] ... Scotland's most distinguished philosopher never held a philosophy chair.'²³ Bad consequences did follow from Hume's candour, not only for Hume personally but for Scotland as well.